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DEPARTMENT FOR SA/INS

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SUBJECT: TSUNAMI VICTIMS STILL NEED ADEQUATE PERMANENT HOUSING

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) July 18-20, poloff visited Galle, Ambalangoda, Ambalantota, Matara, and Hambantota to investigate the status of tsunami relief. In meetings with various government agents (GAs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and USAID officers, interlocutors reported that there is still a strong need for adequate, permanent housing. Challenges to the restoration effort include: a shortage of land, non-tsunami affected people inhabiting temporary shelters in attempts to collect aid, inadequate community infrastructure provided by the government, tension between different classes, people's growing dependence on aid, and severely decreased sales by entrepreneurs trying to restore their businesses. However, newly created communities of Muslims and Buddhists appear to be living together harmoniously. Notably, the opposition United National Party (UNP), campaigning on a platform of economic reform, is garnering strong support amongst southern Sri Lankans who are still struggling to rebuild after the tsunami. End summary.

A FEW SUCCESSES, BUT MANY PROBLEMS
REMAIN WITH CURRENT SHELTERS

2. (SBU) Poloff toured a temporary house built by Community Habitat Finance International (CHF) and funded by USAID. The housing consisted of a six-inch elevated, cement foundation designed to prevent flooding and walls that reached the ceilings of the shelters to ensure privacy. The community housed approximately 20 families with a space of twice each shelter's height between each home, where each structure was built on an angle to create the effect of more space. Each house had gutters to collect rainwater that was transported to water filtration systems. Verandas were being added to houses and many homes had their own vegetable garden. Cecil Jayasooriya, an inhabitant of the camp, stated that he was completely satisfied with the shelter given to him.

3. (SBU) CHF officer Jim Kennedy told poloff that communities as well-planned as the CHF camp are scarce in the south. According to Kennedy, many of the NGOs working in the area are providing substandard shelters, both permanent and temporary. For instance, he explained, the Danish People's Aid had built temporary housing without the use of j-hooks on the roofing, causing strong winds to peel back the aluminum sheet ceiling. Permanent housing had roofing with a lifespan of only a few years, no sink or shower, an unenclosed outdoor bathroom, no electricity, and walls that did not reach the ceiling, Kennedy pointed out. He noted that shelters are built as close together as possible due to the scarcity of land, affording little privacy and creating a fire hazard since many homes are built from lumber.

4. (SBU) Using Kennedy's criteria to assess a permanent house built in Siri Bopora by the NGO CARE, poloff noticed that the home appeared to have some structural inadequacies but was functional overall. The walls did not reach the ceiling which poloff was told only had a lifespan of a few years. However, the house did have electricity, an enclosed (but outdoor) toilet and shower, and it followed the rule of two heights of a house between each of the structures.

5. (SBU) Kennedy stated that one of the greatest challenges NGOs faced was the scarcity of available land outside the 100 meter buffer zone. According to him, NGOs are unable to tear down the temporary housing and use the land to build permanent shelters because Sri Lankans unaffected by the tsunami are inhabiting the temporary homes. In a separate meeting, Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) of Matara, Chandana Wickramaratna, agreed with this assessment of tsunami relief. Buddhist monk Venerable Gnanavisuddhi Thero of the Sri Wijayananda Pirivena of Galle temple, also emphasized the need for adequate permanent

housing. Thero stated that if the tsunami-affected people receive permanent homes, other problems would fade away. At a separate meeting, Devaka Amarasena of Christian Children's Fund (CCF) concurred that sufficient, permanent housing is vital.

POOR GOVERNMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

16. (SBU) Inhabitants of the CHF-funded tsunami relief camp in Ahungalle complained that there was inadequate transportation for tsunami victims. The Divisional Secretary (DS) is supposed to provide busing for children,

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but parent Cecil Jayasooriya explained that the bus did not come everyday and often came an hour late. Community Leader Aruna Jayaweera agreed that this was problematic for children and adults alike. While the children are unable to attend school, there is no one to watch them while the parents look for employment. Meanwhile, the closest stores are six kilometers away from camp.

17. (SBU) Jayasooriya also stated that he received the 5,000 rupee allowance, which the government had pledged to provide monthly, only three times in the seven months after the tsunami. Shopowner Barsham told poloff in a separate meeting that he had received the allowance only two times.

18. (SBU) Goudsmith, a representative of GOAL, told poloff that government policy with respect to the 100-meter buffer zone and giving grants is unclear. Also, poor communication between the central and local governments, makes it difficult to complete relief work. Amarasena of CCF added that government infrastructure is inadequate and there is a need for bus stops, street signs, etc.

AID BECOMES A MORAL HAZARD

19. (SBU) Goudsmith also told poloff that people have become complacent and do not feel motivated to find employment while they are receiving aid. She stated that peoples' attitudes towards aid ran from a continuum of initial pride and refusal of funds, to acceptance as a loan, and finally to demands for grants that don't need to be repaid or accounted for. In a separate meeting, Amarasena agreed that there is a growing dependence on aid as a means of subsistence for the tsunami affected as well as those who pose as victims. Goudsmith told poloff she was concerned that tsunami victims are unaware that the assistance is temporary and that the GOAL program in Sri Lanka is slated to end December 2006.

CLASS CLASH

10. (SBU) Wickramaratna said that there is tension between different classes in the Matara district. For example, he cited wealthy families' allegations of theft by the poor. Yet the disputes are difficult to resolve since items may have been washed away by the tsunami. The police often confiscate the questioned items until ownership can be determined, Wickramaratna noted. In a separate meeting, Hanson concurred with Wickramaratna's statement. In addition, Hanson remarked that the wealthy went to live with their relatives following the tsunami and later return to reap aid benefits, which fuelled the resentment of the poor who stayed in inadequate temporary housing. Goudsmith also told poloff that some class clashes have occurred in the Dickwella camp of the Hambantota District. Previously affluent people were often unwilling to take what was offered to them by GOAL, Goudsmith observed.

DECREASED DEMAND FOR GOODS
AND HOTEL SERVICES

11. (SBU) Poloff met with several store owners, whose businesses were completely destroyed by the tsunami, and who then rebuilt their shops on credit. All entrepreneurs experienced a decrease in sales after the tsunami. Nizam of Salile and Co. in Galle, owner of a pharmacy and accessory shop, sells one-tenth of his pre-tsunami sales. A.R.M. Cassim of Thoufeek and Sons and Barsham of Faizals, owners of saree shops, have both seen a 25 percent decrease in sales. Only Nizam has reduced his staff. He reported a decrease in competition and is now experiencing a gradual increase in sales.

12. (SBU) Suresh Fernando of Hambantota Trader's Association told poloff that area tourist businesses, such

as hotels, have seen a drop of sales to approximately 30 percent of pre-tsunami income. Fernando owns the Ayurveda Beach Resort in Hambantota, which was unaffected by the tsunami. He explained that the hotel has managed to retain

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some business by directly marketing to Germans while emphasizing the benefits of ayurvedic (traditional herbal) treatments. Fernando blames extensive press coverage of the tsunami for the loss of business.

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RELIGIOUS HARMONY

13. (SBU) Buddhist monk Thero told poloff that followers of Buddhism seem to have become more religious since the tsunami. The Buddhist monks held a chanting session in June

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to bless the village of Galle, an annual event which few attended prior to the tsunami, but which 100,000 attended this year June 5-12. Also, Thero's temple housed 5,000 people of various faiths for one month after the tsunami.

14. (SBU) Amarasena noted that people are living together harmoniously across religious lines. He told poloff that Buddhist and Muslim children who attend a Christian Children's Fund (CCF) school go to a nearby Buddhist temple to pray together. Furthermore, the local staff of the CCF is 99 percent Buddhist, Amarasena said. SSP Wickaramartna and Goudsmith also separately told poloff that the Muslim and Buddhist communities are living together peacefully.

TSUMANI-AFFECTED APPEAR TO FAVOR UNP

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15. (SBU) Fernando believes that people in Hambantota will vote for the UNP in the next election because they are concerned with the state of the economy and generally feel that the UNP addresses economic issues more effectively than other parties. Jayasooriya told poloff that he himself voted for the UNP in the last election, and plans to vote the same way again. He is frustrated with the current government's inability to address the needs of the tsunami-affected people. He added that Government officials do not visit the tsunami relief camps and are unresponsive to the demands of the victims.

16. (SBU) Hanson has noticed a marked decline in support for the Marxist Sinhalese-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party. He explained that the JVP is against foreign influence and aid from NGOs, but people affected by the tsunami are more concerned with "bread and butter" issues than with theoretical ideals.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) There is a strong need for sufficient permanent housing, but the lack of available land poses a serious challenge to NGOs trying to meet this demand. The growing dependence on foreign aid will likely aggravate the floundering regional economy since fewer people are motivated to find their own employment. The GSL must develop better infrastructure, communicate more effectively with NGOs, and be held accountable for inadequacies, in order to have an efficient relief campaign. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that people of different religions and ethnicities are managing to live together peacefully in the southern provinces of Sri Lanka.

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